

# Editorial

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## Threatened Birds of India: Need for immediate conservation action

In 1963, Sir Peter Scott, one of the founder-members of World Wildlife Fund (now World Wide Fund for Nature) suggested to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) to bring out a document on "threatened wildlife that includes definitions of degree of threats". Thus, the idea of Red Data books was conceived. The first loose-leafed spiral bound edition appeared in 1964, which was regularly updated as more species joined the list or more information was made available (Vincent 1966-1971). The second edition of this series was published in the late 1970s (King 1978-79). This book was reprinted in 1981 as *ENDANGERED BIRDS OF THE WORLD: THE ICBP BIRD RED DATA BOOK*, by Smithsonian Institution, Washington, USA. This book described 437 threatened subspecies and species of birds.

BirdLife (earlier International Council for Bird Preservation) is the official Listing Authority for Birds for the IUCN Red List and works closely with the IUCN Species Specialist Groups (SSGs). In 1985, the first regional bird Red Data Book of Africa and related islands was published (Collar and Stuart 1985); followed by the highly acclaimed *BIRDS TO WATCH* in 1988 (Collar and Andrew 1988). It was the first global list of 1,029 birds threatened with extinction. An updated version of this book was published in 1994 as *BIRDS TO WATCH-2* (Collar *et al.* 1994) listing 1,111 species, including 171 species of India. Prior to this book, another regional Bird Red Data Book was brought out by BirdLife titled *THREATENED BIRDS OF THE AMERICAS* (Collar *et al.* 1992). In 2000, another landmark publication *THREATENED BIRDS OF THE WORLD*, which had a list of 1,186 species worldwide, and 123 species in India, was published (BirdLife International 2000). For the first time, Near Threatened species were also documented. The following year saw the publication of two volumes of *THREATENED BIRDS OF ASIA* (BirdLife International 2001) that document 323 globally threatened species found in Asia. Most worrying was that 41 species were Critical and 65 were Endangered, meaning that if nothing was done, these species would disappear in the next 5-10 years. This book also documents 317 Near Threatened species which are close to qualifying as globally threatened.

Since 2000, the BirdLife is maintaining a dynamic World Bird Database, which makes information on globally threatened birds available on the website ([www.birdlife.org/datazone/species.index.html](http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/species.index.html)). This database is updated on an annual basis. In the latest version (uploaded on January 2009), 149 Indian bird species are threatened. This includes 14 Critical, 12 Endangered, 58 Vulnerable, 63 Near Threatened and two Data Deficient species. The Critical list also includes two supposedly extinct species: Himalayan or Mountain Quail *Ophryysia superciliaris* and Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*.

In 2005, Rasmussen and Anderton brought out two volumes of *BIRDS OF SOUTH ASIA: THE RIPLEY GUIDE* in which many subspecies were upgraded to species. In BirdLife there is a debate as to what level of a taxon: subspecies or species should the degree of threat be applied. At present, it is done chiefly at the species level. If Rasmussen and Anderton's (2005) classification is accepted, the list of threatened bird species in India increases, particularly those from Andaman and Nicobar; many of which would qualify for the Red Data List criteria as they have small insular populations facing numerous threats. For example, Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) suggest species status for the Andaman Teal *Anas albugularis*, considered until now as a subspecies of the widely distributed Grey Teal *Anas gibberifrons*. It is endemic to a few islands in Andaman, and the total population may not be more than 1,000 individuals (Vijayan *et al.* 2006), making it a high priority species for conservation in India. Similarly, the Andaman Barn Owl *Tyto deroepstorffi* was earlier considered as a subspecies of the globally distributed Common Barn Owl *Tyto alba* (Ali and Ripley 1983), but is now considered a species (Konig *et al.* 1999; Rasmussen and Anderton 2005). It is a resident on some islands in Andaman, with only five known specimens. An endemic species with a very small population makes the Andaman Barn Owl a high priority species for conservation in India.

In India, about 1,220 species of birds have been recorded (number depends on the classification we use) out of which 149 or c. 10% are threatened, which is not a very comfortable situation. Besides including most of the species in the Wildlife Protection Act (including 100 species in Schedule I: highest protection on paper), and banning bird trade since 1991, not much is being done to reverse the decline. There is no long-term bird species recovery programme, and the sanctuaries established, especially for threatened species (e.g., Sailana Lesser Florican Sanctuary, Karera Bustard Sanctuary, Rollapadu Bustard Sanctuary, Desert National Park and many more), suffer from administrative and financial neglect. Even the pitiable condition of the world-famous Keoladeo National Park has not stirred the attention of the Government. Its natural water supply has been cut off due to wrong administrative decisions, depriving the famous *jheels* of Keoladeo of water. Work to supply water by pipes to the Park has yet to start although the decision was taken five years ago after court order.

Although more than 600 protected areas of India provide habitat and some security to the threatened and non-threatened species, there are many species whose habitat is either not represented or under-represented in the PA network. For example, Yellow-throated Bulbul *Pycnonotus xantholaemus* is endemic to southern India. It is known from 80 localities, with all recent records from hills south of 16° N and east of 76° E. It is still locally common, but appears to be declining overall. Recent surveys of 75 localities found that it had totally disappeared from six historical sites, and at most occupied sites it is considered scarce (Thejaswi 2004). It lives in dry thorny jungles interspersed with large trees among broken stony hillocks, and deciduous forests. It is largely a sedentary resident; isolated populations are sometimes found in boulder-strewn hillsides or rocky outcrops with dense undergrowth in seemingly unfavourable landscape. As these boulder-strewn hillsides do not have charismatic mega-vertebrates (except for an occasional Leopard *Panthera pardus*), not many people are interested in protecting them.

Similarly, the Yellow Weaver or Finn's Baya *Ploceus megarhynchus* is endemic to northern India, where it is known from disjunct populations in the *terai* and from eastern Nepal to Assam. It has always been very locally distributed, and the disappearance of several colonies in recent decades indicates that it is declining. The recently discovered population in Nepal is estimated at <50 birds (BirdLife International 2008). It is reported from Haldwani and Pilibhet regions of northern India, and Manas in Assam, but everywhere in small numbers. It is still traded and smuggled for foreign market. It prefers marshes and wet areas with extensive stands of *Imperata*, *Narenga*, and *Saccharum* grasses, particularly those that are seasonally inundated, with well-scattered trees, and occasionally interspersed with patchy rice and sugarcane cultivation. Presently, BirdLife International (2008) has kept it in the Vulnerable category, but looking at its rapidly declining numbers, and scarcity of habitat, it has to be upgraded to the Endangered category.

Another example of conservation neglect is the Indian Skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*. It is found on larger rivers from Pakistan, through Nepal and India to Bangladesh and Myanmar. It was common in the 19th century in Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, but there are very few recent records from Myanmar and none from Laos, Cambodia or Vietnam (BirdLife International 2008). It is uncommon in Pakistan (Roberts 1991) and Nepal (Inskipp and Inskipp 1991). In India also, it is becoming uncommon although still seen on larger north Indian rivers. Its major population could be in the Padma-Meghna delta in Bangladesh. Its total global population is estimated at 6,000-10,000 individuals (BirdLife International 2001, 2008).

In India, it is mainly found in north India, from Punjab (rare) through Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar to West Bengal, extending up to Orissa (Chilika) and the Brahmaputra. Possibly a separate population is in Narmada, Mahanadi, Tapti, Godavari, and Krishna rivers in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. As a winter migrant, it is reported from Saurashtra and the western coast of Gujarat and Maharashtra. It is not recorded south of about 16° N (Ali and Ripley 1983). It occurs primarily on larger, sandy, lowland rivers, around lakes and adjacent marshes, and in the non-breeding season, estuaries and coasts. It breeds colonially on large, exposed sand-bars and islands. Here the problem comes. Most of the river islands, even temporary sandbanks, are now occupied by man and his animals (dogs, cats, cattle) and House Crows *Corvus splendens*, which are seen around any human settlement. Sudden release of water from dams inundates the islands or more often, withdrawal of excessive water expose the river islands to ground predators as a result of which the Indian Skimmer faces nesting failure year after year. Even its main nesting river, the Chambal, is now under increasing threats of withdrawal of water despite being a Sanctuary!

Among the threatened Indian birds, some have not been seen for many decades. For example, the Manipur Bush-quail *Perdica manipurensis* was last seen in 1932, and now in 2006 in Manas Tiger Reserve, Assam (Anwaruddin Choudhury *pers. comm.*, 2006). It is endemic to north-east India and probably Bangladesh (extinct?). Not much is known about this diminutive and shy bird of tall damp grasslands. No attempt is being made to even know its current distribution. Another example is Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personata*, a bird of mangrove and wetlands in dense forests. This bird has not been seen for many years in India, except for a stray record from Coringa Sanctuary in Andhra Pradesh. During the Annual Waterfowl Count from 1997 to 2007 in Asia (Li *et al.* 2009), it was recorded only from 14 sites, none in India. It was reported from Sundarbans of Bangladesh, twice in 1990 (one bird) and 2002 (two birds), so it is likely to be present on the Indian side also.

In 2004, the Indian Bird Conservation Network, BNHS, BirdLife International, and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds released a list of 446 sites that qualify the global criteria as Important Bird Areas (Islam and Rahmani 2004). Nearly 200 of these IBAs do not have any legal support in the form of Protected Areas established under the Indian Wildlife Protection Act. Many of these IBAs qualify for a Park or Sanctuary status, and the rest can be declared as Community or Conservation Reserves. Although more than 600 Indian PAs provide protection to threatened bird species, if we add the 200 non-protected IBAs in this category, all the species which need site-based approach of protection will be saved. For species such as the Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps*, Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*, Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, which live in a larger landscape, general environmental protection will be required.

The Government of India has to look beyond Project Tiger and the existing protected area network if it is sincere in protecting all biodiversity, including many threatened bird species which find no 'god father' or do not provide commercial incentive to some as the tiger conservation business does.

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